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Fortnightly Sermon

By
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A GRATEFUL SPIRIT
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A GRATEFUL SPIRIT.

“O, give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good.”

—PSALM CXVIII, 1.

It is my purpose to offer you some thoughts about gratefulness; for this virtue always is in place, pressing on a right heart, and therefore thoughts about it always useful, I hope. What I have to say flows from this one truth, that I find gratefulness to be an instance under the universal law of repayment or justice. It has been called, very finely I think, “the justice of the heart.”

It is according to nature that we should pay for whatever is of so much value that we wish it. In many different ways this payment is exacted; and whether it is levied by man or nature, it is not to be escaped.

Very often we pay the cost to men, and as it seems perhaps on the surface, the whole cost, as when we buy any article of use or beauty. But very often we pay the whole cost to nature; which is to say, we are obliged to satisfy nature's conditions before we can attain the object, as when we dig in a mine for wealth or learn hard sciences by the labors of observation and reflection. More often still, we pay both men and nature, as when we acquire skill in any art, pictorial, plastic, musical, mechanical, paying the teacher with money, but satisfying nature with application. In either case it is a payment by matter, I mean by giving so much of substance or material for what we wish; for whether we pay the teacher with valuable materials, or satisfy nature with the consumption of muscle and brain, it is the same fact; a material payment is made. Moreover, beforehand we paid muscle and brain for the values in property which we pay to the teacher; so that in the end, in whatever case, we pay by consuming ourselves, by using up our

bodies for what we wish. In the words of Jesus, "virtue goes out from" us, and we pay of our very bodies, either to fix them in capital values, or to purchase the immortal values of the mind. And what a thought! what a thought this is (just to touch it in passing, for I cannot pause on it), that by this material payment, by simply paying off bits from our unfixed and ebbing substance, we buy the spiritual and the everlasting.

But now, while always we must pay for what we get, it often appears that there is no equivalent material at hand wherewith to pay, none at hand I say, and none to be found. This is because the benefits we receive are beyond all price. There are costly things that transcend payment, life, liberty, love, a sacrifice for friendship, a gentle word of warning just in time, a helping hand just at the right instant, an inspiring example, a forbearing charity, sometimes just a sympathetic understanding of us. What shall we do with these things, which it seems we cannot pay for? Justice then arrives, as I figure it, at a bar, at a high gate, at its limits or boundary; and there it must stay if it have no higher thought of itself than the material payment which I have spoken of. But if it have a higher thought, then it takes a leap over into love. Love repays with itself, that is to say with gratefulness. And this is a payment that satisfies the equation. On the one side appears a benefit past all commercial valuation, on the other side, an inestimable return.

Now if we have a grateful spirit, and labor and yearn above all things to do first the justice of payment, and then that which is so heavenly and far beyond what we mean by justice, then to speak our thanksgiving is this gratitude put into form. We embody it, which is the same thing as to make it lovely in appearance to other persons. This expression is the beauty of it, its music, its oration, its poem;—the beauty of gratefulness, as appears when it fills a face or an attitude with grace, or an eye with unshed but most visible tears. The music of it, when it attunes the voice to a gentle and sweet tone. The oration of it, when it makes the dumb eloquent, as I have heard it. And the poem of it, when it breaks forth into hymns and praise, with rapture. There is naught that exceeds the simple and glorious eloquence which sometimes leaps like the morning

light from pure gratefulness of feeling. A friend wrote me once, very early in the morning, "A lovely morning this, so crisp and bright. At my window is a poplar tree whose green rustling leaves are a great pleasure to me. If I were lonely, they would talk. But I have no time for loneliness. What a blessing, after all, lies in this constant business." This is the simple eloquence (and how beautiful!) of a grateful heart.

In a word, plainly, this speaking is gratefulness manifested by word and sign, and gratefulness is but a continuation of justice, as I have said, being but spiritual payment for a benefit too great or too sacred for material remuneration. Well now, follow a little this idea of gratefulness as justice, "the justice of the heart." For when did ever justice lead astray? We speak of Justice as the "Blind Goddess;" but when did not even the blind follow the blind goddess safely, as if the blaze of noon-day had somehow struck from within on the eyes closed outwardly!

It will appear that the benefit which calls forth gratitude, if we look at it, must be a *just* benefit. No sentiment worthy of this good name of gratefulness can arise for a boon to ourselves which is an injustice or an evil to others. We could not be thankful, for example, to one who should aid us with stolen goods; for if he told us they were stolen, he would but make us party to the crime; and if he told us not, then it would be but a treachery to us, which we could not give thanks for when we learned it. Attention, favor, honor, no matter what, *anything*, at the expense of another's righteous dues, or sensitive feelings even, can create no gratefulness. One who accepted these things or thought them advantageous, still would be unable to profane with them the shrine of a grateful spirit; for this spirit flames forth to meet only the just, the noble, the pure deed. In fine, there is no way of being truly grateful for anything we ought not to have. I suspect the philosophy of this truth may be a deep-seated instinct, belonging to the sociable nature of man, namely, that an apparent benefit to ourselves, which is an injustice to another, cannot really be a benefit, or even an advantage, and therefore calls for no gratefulness. That can never be good for one which is bad for another. The human family, ay, and all beings, are a unit in circumstance, bound all together by "the chain of things, which the next unto the farthest brings," to such

effect that none can be helped at another's cost or hurt. There is, in truth, a kind of impregnable oneness in humanity,—I call it impregnable because if we look at it it rises as a rampart before human society, fronting all the hosts of darkness,—the oneness that we are all members one of another, and that if one part suffer another suffers with it, as Paul said long ago, and that no human creature, or other creature with purpose in his acts or with power to feel, can be grown up to blessedness, or can be content and happy in the very smile of God, if therefrom be banished any one, the least or the worst. You know the old doctrine, that the beatific life in heaven will be the happier for hell, and the blest will give thanks for their salvation the more devoutly in view of the terrors which they escape. That doctrine is so monstrous a fact as hardly to be conceived, if history testified not to it so plainly. Strange, that any human creature could delight to imagine himself as a greedy buzzard, feeding on the body of another's woe. Now, it is in my doctrine of gratefulness that no creature but a monster could utter or feel a thanksgiving for himself in heaven, if once he entered there,—I can imagine he might think he could, in an unheavenly state of mind, before he attained the blessed realm; but once there he could not,—so long as there were a corner of hell left burning. Rather, like Whittier's Piero Lucca, one would say, "the world of pain were better, if therein one's heart might still be human, and desires of natural pity drop upon its fires some cooling tears."

So far then we go, following the idea of gratitude as justice; to this point, that there can be no gratefulness for an injustice or for any unfair advantage given, nay, nor even for any pain that we escape if thereby another feel it; that nothing unfair or unjust can be really a benefit; that an apparent privilege or advantage can be naught but a delusion, a snare and a fraud if it involve injustice to any one. Now, it is wonderful how clear all the ways of life and all the questions of men's deeds appear before this principle. Let a man but be filled with the thought of human oneness, so that he feels as quick in his heart a breach of this unity by any injustice, and detects it as instantly, as he would the violation of the organic oneness of his own body if it were torn, and in such a man you shall find eyes

wonderfully clear in sight, so that pretense and all false reasonings are pierced as with lances, and slain. All about us we hear Pilate's question, "What is truth?" There is another very deep question, and that is, "Who shall answer that question?"—I mean the question of Pilate. Not the selfish man; not he who receives aught without loving gratefulness; not the hermit, whose abode is dark caves of personal and sordid schemes; not the vain, the giddy, the careless; not the ambitious, the proud, vain and happy in their ambitions merely. In questions of the higher reason, it is more important what we *are* than with what skill or genius we think. Wherefore, I am never tired of saying that it is not the finely endowed, the talented, the strong, who shall see life as it is, but they who are round, like life, and deep and broad and sound. While the wrangle grows loud, and truth is said to be this or that, and arguments thicken that it lies here, lies there, in this motive, in this fact, or that equivocation or accommodation are in league with truth, or that silence always is right, no matter what the appearance be, or that one may deceive in love and war, and many debates to such-like purpose, flying like vampire bats around a cause that lies bleeding,—while this wrangling goes on, there comes a wise man of the ancients saying, "To speak the truth is to say what contains not the least harm to any one." Then how the air clears, how the fogs fly! Oh, what a definition that is! A saying comparable for spiritual insight to that of Jesus, "By this ye shall know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one for another." Both these sayings reach down to the unity of humanity, by which it exists as one body of many parts in vital union, so that nothing which is an injury to the least can be a truth or honor, or a privilege or an advantage, or aught but a pain, to the highest or the greatest.

O! friends, what wondrous fibres these are that are spun back and forth between us! I heard a good man and a poet say once that he could not conceive how he talked back and forth with any human fellow, except through God. What infinite length of web, invisible and dim, binds us all together!

What is the mystery of this spiritual coordination, this connection, by which all live or all die in one act, in one instant, through waves of force that go from soul to soul in circles and spread forever, these lines of influence that play all through

society like common nerves by which the pain or pleasure, the vice or virtue of each adds its quantum to the common weal or woe which all do feel, these ineffable wonders,—what is this but the image, I would rather say *the body*, of that Supreme Unity on which “the many” rest? All our issues are received into the bosom of God. Jesus says that the supreme mercy rains alike on the evil and the good, makes those gracious drops to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. Ay; but those drops first ascended from the earth, they are our issues received into His bosom; and they come back as they went forth, *from* all of us, *upon* all of us, on the just and the unjust,—the combined drop which both the bad and the good here distilled and evaporated forth; and both must receive it again. Often I look at a little child with awe, to think how at those little feet,—so little, so helpless, so dear,—at those little feeble feet, a city, a continent, a world, focuses its rays. On the little head rain such hot vibrations and cool ones, such light rays, such dark ones. And alas! what part of them from me? Where go my words, my looks, nay, my very thoughts, desires, hopes, and whatever may be most hidden, which make motions in the brain that must fall somewhere, and start tides of waves to prattle or dash on a human body and soul? Oh bless, bless the *good* things that go on their way from us, as often they do,—God be thanked!—soft as angels’ wings who guide to will and to do! Blessed be the gratefulness, the loves, the unselfish sacrifices, the innocences and heroisms, that float like clouds in heaven and descend on babies’ heads like summer rain, first lifted up from us!

From all this, again, I gather, as to the objects or causes of gratefulness, that we must not give thanks by comparison. That is a sad and mean selfishness, and unfeelingness. It is not well to give thanks that we are not as others are, in danger, or in want, or in pain. The Pharisee’s thanksgiving, “Lord I thank thee that I am not as other men are,” seems to be condemned by the common agreement of mankind, as well as by the gentle Jesus. But if it be hardhearted or vulgar to feel spiritual exultation, to give thanks for greater virtue or piety or knowledge than falls to another’s lot, is it any better, tell me, to be thankful that we excell a neighbor in goods, possessions,

honor, house, lands, wealth, strength, power, pleasures, comforts? Let us not be complacent by comparison. I have read this fine saying somewhere, "I am sad when I find myself superior to any one." Is not that good? Truly, we ought all to understand the feeling of shame over triumph. I know not always how I *do* feel, but how I ought I know; and if I were conscious of a gulf or difference between me and any other, I know it ought to be less painful to me to be on the humble side of it; for it is inspiring to look up, but it is torture to look down. It is a great thing to gaze, far up the height, on some perfect saintliness above. How glorious it seems, how above all reach! Ay, but why? Because it is the law of that very height, of that character that stands thereon, that by a mirage in that high atmosphere, I, poor and imperfect, am lifted to that cloud-land, and the saint sees me only on the level of his eye.

Charles Sumner said he knew no other rule of right for a good nation, than that which is binding on a good man. He struck in that saying the key-note of morality, the key in which Time forever must compose its melodies. The saying is the more worthy and timely because what is allowed to be true and binding in near relations, often is held to be foolish or sentimental when distributed or enlarged. But I appeal to experiment. Never yet has it been thought to try whether the love that creates a home may not be potent to preserve a state; whether the tender justice, the forbearance, the helping hand, the endearment that cement friendship, may not also be the forces that can convert an enemy, or bring an alien to our arms. What! say you perhaps, what! scatter your heart about at the store as at the house? What! go sprinkling the byways with love that belongs at home, as if I were pouring myself out in spray from a watering-pot? Yea, truly, friend; and yet I counsel not anything inconsistent with a gentle and delicate reserve. There will be more love at home when there is more abroad, and never before. The only justification of my loving any one person, is that it is a little focussing of a great wide human love; for otherwise private affections are simply a miser's goods. A sense of fellowing with all mankind must lie at the bottom of any personal fellowship, however private and tender, if it is to be rescued from greediness. Will a man love mother or wife or sister nobly, think you, who cares not

whether other women go unsheltered, so his be housed well? By what name may we call the feeling of the father for his little son if the man go about every day blind and deaf to all the temptations that the dear sons of other men must meet in these flaunting streets? I perceive that it is a plain law of love that he who hates anything, or is unmoved by the claim of the whole, thereby is stopped by God from loving any one worthily, and his sentiment only reels and staggers like a drunkard about the little circle of his private indulgences.

But my text says, "Oh give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good." "He is good." Notice, it says not, good *to us*; simply, "He is good." Gratefulness, as I have said, makes no comparisons. It is not more or less because fortune be more or less than once it was, or than another's is now. Gratefulness is not quickened because our plenty is very plain, and shines by contrast against some wider want or common poverty. Gratefulness inspires not thanks that we are not as other men are. It simply lifts up the spirit to acknowledge with joy the infinite goodness of God. The Hindoos have a saying that a benefit finds its only measure in the worth of those who have received it. It may be of more or less outward value, its real worth is measured by its reception,—whether ignobly and sordidly, or generously and humanely received. Says Lord Bacon, "If a man be thankful for small benefits, it shows that he weighs men's minds, and not their trash." All getting ourselves into a corner with our hearts and interests, the cutting off ourselves from the general import and body of humanity, this is not gratefulness, but ungratefulness. We may not give thanks because something is ours and not another's; this is not gratitude, but miserly chuckling. Samuel Johnson called patriotism "the last refuge of a scoundrel"—not because there is not a noble and humane love of country possible and glorious, but because a fierce and mean partisanship may cover a skulking selfishness at enmity with the race,

To speak thus is simply the expression of our great joy in the universe, the great joy we may feel in the benignant and blessed Power in which we are; a gladness and gratefulness oh! not, *not* that God shows *us* favors, and covers *us* with blessings, but that he *is* Favor and Blessing, and Love and

Peace and Goodness everywhere; a sense of trust in that things are as they are; of adoration, simply, of infinite Goodness; of sympathy with the gladness of creatures, and tender desires toward those creatures, with joy when our desires appear beaming in their happiness. True gratefulness will not single out ourselves, but rather merge us in all beings, until we are filled with joy that there is so much joy, and that is all; of which joy our own is the least part and is most worthy in what it draws from our love of others. Not to give thanks that we are better off than others, but to make some others better off than they were, that is the impulse of the grateful soul—to improve the state of somebody, to add some drop of the oil of comfort or the wine of joy—a privilege, or some good thing, or a happiness bestowed.

Think of this a moment,—What is God but infinite Bestowal and the Joy of it? And there are abodes of little cheer, yes, sometimes I think of no cheer; there are such things—think of that—left for *our* spheres of bestowal. Some barren land may be converted into a land of milk and honey by us, *by us*. Think what happiness so may be shed about, and *what a thing happiness is!* Mrs. Jameson says it is as dignified and sacred a thing as morality; and it may be fruitful in a very lovely morality, being a constant encouragement and lifting, if it be taken gratefully. Then think, by this help of ours, what thanksgiving, that is, what forms of utterance of this grateful spirit, may go out like songs, like glad songs mingling with ours, yea, a part of our very own, concerted all together like melodies in a harmony, each lovely in itself, but loveliest with all others together—*by this help of ours*.

